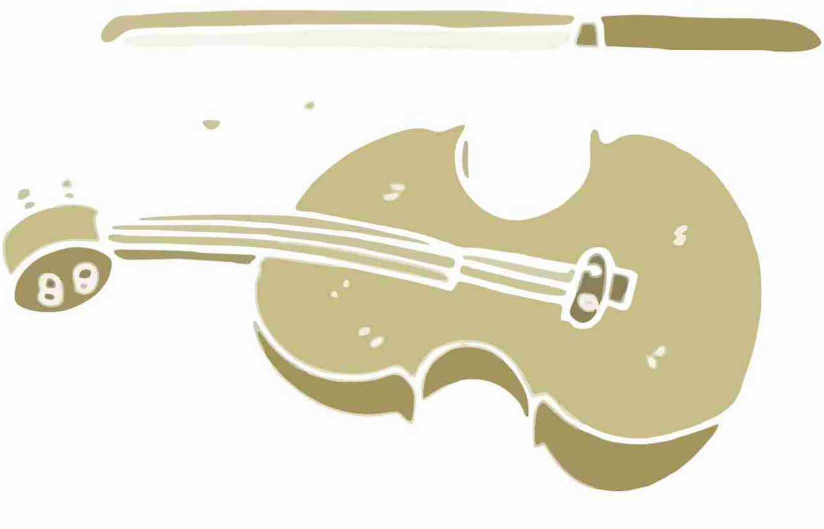
Adrian Nae

RUSSIAN FIDDLER

Tales from Romania about Russia

(2021-2022)



Presa Universitară Clujeană

ADRIAN NAE

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The Future Has the Flavour of the Past

Welcome to Yeats!

Is it possible to leave a book with such a title, on the shelves of a bookshop without perusing its pages? Certainly, not. But beware, it is not a sequel to Sholem Aleichem's world-famous *Tevye the Dairyman* or to the *Fiddler on the Roo*f musical, although it is about Russia – that very Russia whose choice of imposed authoritarianism forces its best citizens to flee the country for forlorn places, just like Tevye's daughters, while trying to escape Czarist Antisemitism, left their place of birth for America. However, it is about a devilish "fiddler", who for decades already, plays a mischievous score meant to allude to the destruction of our universe of peace, individual values and sound ethics of freedom. That "fiddler" uses no musical instrument, but a gun, and his appetite for setting the world ablaze haunts us since the early 2000's. His Hieronymus Bosch – like deadly dance brought chaos into the world, misery and death. No wonder if the future readers of the book will promptly guess whom I refer to.

The main character of this collection of academic papers and essays is Russia. Not just the country, but its top leaders – Putin included – and their incredible way of substituting known reality with clinical, pathological political fantasies, while replacing rationality with a bellicose will, that would hardly escape from a comparison with Hitler's ill-fated ambitions from before 1945. It is a book that speaks not only of what international relations nowadays mean, after pocketing Crimea in 2014 and invading Ukraine eight years after. Dr. Adrian Nae endeavoured to provide us with academic, i.e. competent, analyses about Russia's strategic objectives and plans, domestic policies, popular mentalities and propaganda mechanisms and effects. There is also a

secondary character, namely the Republic of Moldova, who feels the frosty breath of the Bear differently from what we, members of NATO and EU, sense. I gladly learned that Dr. Nae decided some time ago, to bring together most of the papers he authored while participating, under the aegis of the Romanian Centre for Russian Studies (University of Bucharest), to a joint Romanian-Norwegian project aiming at describing and explaining the strategic challenges both countries face due to Russia's military expansionism. Topics related to present-day Russia invite scores of academics to address them. This book marks the interest Dr. Nae took into explaining why there is an acute need to better understand Russia as a whole, thus offering the reader the possibility to guess more accurately what the future stands for.

Is it difficult indeed to write about Russia while concentrating on Putin's heavy political weight and decisions only? Yes, when the researcher does not understand that Putin himself is the toxic fruit of Russia's contemporary history. What we tend to call "Putin's regime" and consider its creation as overlapping the early 2000's, when he became president, is an assumption most academics have contradicted and criticized. The processes resulting in what we imagine "Putin's regime" be, began well before the collapse of the Soviet Union and then underwent developments during the entire period of the so-called Boris Yeltsin's democracy. The political ascension of the KGB and today's nestling in the highest echelons of Russia's power, started before Putin; he himself is just a product of these processes of overtaking the state. Dr. Nae, as historian, understands well this dynamic march of the all-powerful secret security apparatus to the helm of the state. As a fact, the name "Putin" defines a network that built a strong and resilient political machine that, while authoritarian in its essence, has succeeded in attracting impressive levels of popular support over decades. This is why the war in Ukraine enjoys almost no criticisms coming from the society; when they however surge, their voices are mostly individual, and the regime knows how to deal with them, KGB-like. The reader will come across well-built conclusions of this kind. I am also grateful to the author

for delving into the cultural and political imaginaries of the Russian society, which were designed to create an artificial sense of "commonhood" against the background of rising nationalism and historical exceptionalism, thus nurturing almost mystically the feeling that the Communist past is "usable", that Russia is a continent and, at the same time, an island of happiness and order in a world run by Western enemies. "Double-speak" – one might say…

The book is certainly useful and worth citing. But, as Dr. Adrian Nae writes in the last lines of his text, it "…does not pretend to be a crystal ball". It may not be, but it offers answers and understanding.

Mihai-Răzvan Ungureanu

(Bucharest, April 2024)

Where Are We Now?

Very Brief Notes about Time, Information Eco-Systems, Propaganda, and Russia

We live in a world where events related to international and domestic politics unfold at an extraordinary pace and where people get bored easily with the rapid flow of news or commentaries. The rapid pace of change has made time our adversary, as we struggle to keep up with the complexities of the modern world. To discern news from facts, propaganda, and misinformation from truth, or to think about the future consequences of our actions.

The lack of time and sometimes self-induced ideas that some stories are far beyond our reach or have little to no consequence on our lives are just some preconceptions peddled by actors that aim to spread propaganda and conspiracy theories. Russia is one such actor – and the main character of this book – but not the only one that takes advantage of our short attention span, social polarisation, and tendency to (re) act disproportionally on different topics (overreact on small topics or ignore important ones).

What Russia does when it comes to weaponizing information can be summed-up by the well-known dictum: *The Devil's greatest trick was to make people think he wasn't real*. Because what Russia does when it aims to manipulate or stir up different social groups is a trick, not magic. Things don't just happen. Russia doesn't invent or create them out of thin air, but Moscow pulls some tricks. And the tricks are not related to world events but are embedded in the audience. In all of us.

Take, for example, the old saying that some things are too abstract, they have no immediate impact on our lives. The mundane but abstract

things that make little impression on audiences are those related to foreign affairs. But this is so wrong in so many visible ways that it is even harder to explain why this is such a very narrow and egocentric point of view.

In a recent article, Vera Tolz and Stephen Hutchings analyzed the politico-academic discourse promoted by Russia to justify Moscow's aggression against Kyiv. Their findings are salient for the above-mentioned thesis that propaganda isn't magic. Tolz and Hutchings identified three types of prevalent propagandistic discourses: colonial/ decolonization, imperialism, and the collective West[1]. All discourses are embedded in historic experiences, and exploit preconceptions deeply rooted in Russian society. Even though such discourses are exploited by elites, we can trace their roots in the Russian society. Collective fears[2] and social inertia are just some of the pillars that enable Russian propaganda nowadays, but at a closer look, they have a correspondence in history and old social reflexes.

The last couple of years have done us a favour. The pandemic taught us the hard way that something that seems to be just a small trouble for a distant country can become – in a matter of days – our worst nightmare. It also made us think about truth and how media ecosystems and lack of time influence the way we perceive the idea of truth. We realized that truth is linked to doubt, and that doubt is what malevolent actors always try to weaponise to sow discord, sometimes by flooding the public space with conspiracies. It is important to note that one-way conspiracies are forged is by questioning every piece of (even scientific) available evidence. The scope is to postpone action or to harvest unhealthy scepticism – like with man-made ozone holes – until society

1 Vera Tolz, Stephen Hutchings, "Truth with a Z: disinformation, war in Ukraine, and Russia's contradictory discourse of imperial identity", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2023, doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2023.2202581, pp. 6-11.

2 "Путин заставил общество и элиты поверить в то, что будущее - это зло Максим Трудолюбов размышляет о том, как долго это еще позволит российскому режиму удерживать власть", *Meduza*, May 23, 2023, https://meduza.io/feature/2023/05/23/putin-zastavil-obschestvo-i-elity-poverit-v-to-chto-buduschee-eto-zlo, last accessed June 1, 2023.

finds itself at the point where it can no longer have healthy beliefs cemented on the best data or evidence[3].

Another lesson was about human attitudes and how human reactions and ideas travel – in our globalized world – in the same way that a deadly pandemic virus spreads. Exactly like a pandemic that ignites in remote parts of the world and affects everyone, the same thing happens to attitudes. And the first attitude that travelled was about the unimportance of the virus (who thought in the early days that COVID would change our lives?). A further lesson of the past couple years is that we live in a globalised society that, when it comes to ideas and ways of acting, tends to copy the behaviour of a Kindergarten classroom: bad attitudes (in a grown-up's world – indifference, radical thinking) tend to spread faster than good reflexes (e.g., investing in education and making educated choices).

The idea that our actions don't matter whatsoever might be true if we were to live in a bubble where only our actions would have an impact. But while we do live in a bubble, we must also be prepared for clashes with other bubbles.

The information space, or bubble, is what shapes attitudes. And attitudes shape actions that always have very tangible results (protests, strikes, riots and wars). There is no novelty in the idea of information bubble: it has been exhibited by humans since time immemorial, but it is more acutely felt today since the internet and all the social media platforms have made it more visible. But if in the past this bubble was not so much of our own making (you couldn't choose to be born into a certain social class), today it pretty much is. The information that we get is a consequence of our actions – pressing like, follow, or subscribe, as dumb and simple as it may seem, is a sort of 21st century oath of fealty. So, a consequence of our actions are the social and political choices that we make. And these are some of the unseen and largely undiscussed vectors that Russia aims to influence. This is how the trick really works. The

3 Caillin O'Connor, James Owen Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age. How False Beliefs Spread*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2019, pp. 19-29.

antibodies for resisting this trick? Not grand actions, acts of heroism, or leading men into war. It is more about thinking. And understanding the times we live in.

Some of our actions are, of course, knowingly or unknowingly influenced by others. We are influenced by the likes and shares of our peers, by our entourage, friends and family. And we are also influenced by trolls. Bluntly said, in my own personal definition, the trolls are real people or bots that work in the field of shaping perceptions. And they do that either because they have a personal interest (dictated by personal beliefs, ideology etc.) or they are on the payroll of another entity that works through them.

Of course, everyone wants to influence the perception of others. We all want to be liked or appreciated. But that doesn't make us trolls in our own personal service. In our times, the most frightening species of trolls are those trying to sow chaos. Because chaos paralyzes and influences choices. A choice made in despair has little chances of being a correct one.

Trolls are enablers of propaganda and propaganda works better in times of chaos and despair. Trolls are not ideologues of propaganda (the ideologue emanated propaganda, comes up with the narratives and meta-narratives), they are the means of channelling propaganda, and their masterful art is that of blurring distinctions through framing and flooding. A successful propagandist (ideologue or troll) knows that blatant lies will be refuted quite easily, but a good framing on a controversial topic might win hearts and minds. Flooding is just the process of repetition. The more people repeat a story using the right framing, the faster the message reaches all social strata.

This leads us to the unhuman trolls, or the bots. Their greatest advantage is that they are faster than human beings and, as observed by Asta Zelenkauskaitė, they operate in the realm of invisibility. Basically, they are algorithms, that "push, promote and circulate content"[4] and that makes them invisible to the untrained eye.

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[4] Asta Zelenkauskaitė, *Creating Chaos Online. Disinformation and Subverted Post-Publics*, University of Michigan Press, 2022, p. 41.

One of the most harmful forms of negative and propagandistic framing is that of conspiracy theories. Conspiracies are at their apex in times of troubles (just an unintended reference to a historic period not so dear to Moscow) and they travel fast through trolls, but emanate from propagandistic ideologues. Martin Kragh, Erik Andermo and Liliia Makashova analyzed such ideologues and their *modi operandi* in spreading conspiracies. They assessed the works of reputable Russian military journals and their conclusion is that conspiracy theories are widespread in the Russian security and military milieu, legitimized by the political elite and an important factor in shaping official policies and thinking[5]. Their findings really make you wonder: does Russia control the narrative of conspiracies, or is Russia controlled by conspiracies. I think the answer is: both.

Conspiracies, bots, ideologues and trolls… this is how malevolent actors try to deceive us and one of these elements' common denominator is time. Because we lack the time to decipher framings, to check for arguments and to check the masks of online communicators. But Time is one more factor that Russia takes advantage of because information bubbles and time are closely interrelated.

One reason why we construct for ourselves information bubbles is that we don't have enough time to consume or understand all the information that is disseminated out there. So, an eco-system of media, opinion leaders, or friends that we trust is a shortcut meant to circumvent the avalanche of information. But time is also what makes us spend too much energy in our information bubble – a situation that can either suppress critical thinking or radicalise. This inevitably leads to clashes with other people who draw information from different eco-systems. Again, the lack of time for listening and thinking about arguments leads to even more polarisation and aggressiveness.

Time also plays against those who lack or refuse media literacy (or are just incapable of becoming media literate). Against those who too

[5] Martin Kragh, Erik Andermo, Liliia Makashova, "Conspiracy theories in Russian security thinking", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 45, Issue 3, p. 27.

often think that news about international and/ or domestic politics are not of their concern. Against those who are unwilling or unable to recognise the importance of *social* in *social sciences*. There are many reasons for such attitudes, and the scope of this introductory part isn't about naming and shaming, but about describing mechanisms.

How does time play against such people? They don't give themselves enough time to analyse and weigh facts and arguments. It is also true that maybe no information eco-system is truly helpful in such an endeavour. As soon as some news comes out, as soon as a picture is taken, or as soon as a rumour migrates from obscure parts of social media into the limelight, a plethora of interpretations and beyond-doubt verdicts appear. The deconstruction of a story, the deconstruction of a certain framing, is a complicated process, but nonetheless an important one. And it becomes even more important in our current social and political context, where state and non-state actors aim to weaponise information or even access to information. Add to this pressure the nascent influence of artificial intelligence in creating news and the use of highly sophisticated means of faking reality.

Another Book on Russia and Propaganda?

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the world's attention to the post-Soviet space was very high. So it was after Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. But after a while, people got tired, even though the problem – Russia – was still there and nothing had changed. On the contrary, after the invasion in Georgia, Russia began to improve its propaganda eco-system and internally, President Putin launched a vigorous campaign to subordinate the press and wipe out whatever was left of civil society and non-systemic opposition.

As Professor Mihai-Răzvan Ungureanu noted in an interview for *Deutsche Welle* in November 2022, Vladimir Putin never made a secret of his expansionist plans. There were signs for Georgia and Ukraine episodes in Vladimir Putin's speeches or Russia's public documents and

analyses, but the international community failed to take them into account. Professor Ungureanu mentions that the international community forgave Russia for Georgia and Ukraine just like a good parent tries to make up with his child after the latter's mild wrongdoing[6].

I would also add the fact that the international community – and I mean the societies, not just the leaders, since leaders are the emanation of societies and are accountable to the people – got bored and distracted very quickly. Why be preoccupied with what is considered high politics, when you can just pretend that nothing bad happened? When you can just put your head in the sand and pretend that everything is business as usual?

It was precisely this boredom and the series of other problems in between the invasions that encouraged Russia to act like it did. In between the invasions, there was also the story about Russia's meddling in the US presidential elections – but most likely, everyone in their information bubbles deemed the story to be about great power politics, hence not important, hence no need to learn more about how propaganda and misinformation really work. This is the trick through which Russia surprised the international community.

This book is about Russia and the post-Soviet space, but its overall aim is more audacious. It is about not letting boredom and time take their toll and make us forget. It is also about reading through the lines of Russian propaganda and putting pieces of information into the right context with the help of extensive media investigations, think tank papers, and academic volumes and articles. This book is made of multiple articles written before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and after. They were all either written for the Romanian Centre for Russian Studies (https://russianstudiesromania.eu/ro/home/) or fomented within this academic framework.

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6 Cristian Ștefănescu, "MRU: Ursul nu te îmbrățișează pentru că te iubește", *Deutsche Welle*, November 6, 2022, https://www.dw.com/ro/mru-ursul-nu-te-îmbrățișează-pentru-că-te-iubește/a-63663614, last accessed June 3, 2023.

These articles might seem old or outdated, but this is exactly the point. They are meant to be photos of important past events that precluded Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They are about what happened and what others, and I have had to say about what happened – because this is how history is written: what happened and how others contextualised what happened.

Apart from the collection of articles published on the site of the Romanian Centre for Russian Studies (they were "language-polished" for this book, but nothing of the essence was changed), this book includes two empirical studies on Russian propaganda. The first one deals with Moscow's diplomatic propaganda targeting Norway and Romania, while the other addresses the question of Telegram as Moscow's weapon of choice for waging propaganda against the Republic of Moldova[7].

I have chosen the period between 2021 and 2022 because I very much believe in beginnings and in endings. Of course, the sun will rise yet another day, no matter where our journey stops. This is the same thing about Russia: it can be better understood through periodization. In this case, 2021 is the year where the clouds of war began to arise, while in 2022 the war had already broken out, and the end of 2022 brought no resolution. Even as we speak, the events unfold at a tremendous pace, even though everyone is watching only the tactical developments.

I took the liberty to include in this book an article published in 2023. But I did so only because I believe it speaks about the transformative power of current events. And just as mentioned in the article, there were both academic and media triggers that helped me cement a certain view about the future.

Let me conclude this short introductory part by trying to make a swift passage to the first article included in this book. An article called *The Legacy* that deals with what will come after Ukraine. For all of us, not only for Russia or Ukraine. *The Legacy* – alongside another article, *What comes after Ukraine? The buzzword for the future will be "crisis"*, which forms

[7] I use both "the Republic of Moldova" or "Moldova", not because my wish is to confuse the reader, but for text-fluency considerations.

the backbone of my view concerning the evolution of international affairs. We are in for a marathon of transformations – some that can be anticipated, others that are just in their infancy (deep fakes, artificial intelligence) – that will completely reshape the world as we know it. Just like empires have fallen, paving the way for new realities and multiple states, the transformations of the future will lead to an increased atomization of societies. In a way, it will be about the survival of the fittest. The best societies and (new) alliances that will emerge will be those that will have not fallen prey to populists, wedge issues and will have found the right manner to control the way in which the world is evolving and not letting the evolutions control their destiny.

The alternative is nowadays Russia's legacy: an atomized society, with individual solutions and no common social ground, clans and classes clashing, and a constant chase for being part of a patronage network (preferably, the winning one). A gloomy and stable destiny in which stability is the perfect expression for backwardness.

In his seminal book, Russia and the Idea of Europe, Professor Iver Neumann makes the point that from the eighteenth century onwards, Russia constructed its identity vis-à-vis Europe either through juxtaposition (*We are the true Europe*) or by copying the European model[8]. Maybe now Russia doesn't want to construct its own identity in relation to Europe, maybe now Russia wants to shape Europe's identity in accordance with its own.

Will Russia succeed?

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[8] Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe. A study in identity and international relations*, Routledge, London & New York, 1996.

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